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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that just as subject matter is inherently value-laden, educators should not feel trepidation about morally justifying their criteria for choosing curricula to be taught in the classroom. It recommends that true "moral" choices should be made on the bases of relevance to student experiences; moral propriety of subject matter proportional to community ideology; subject matter teachability; and educator recognition of the hidden curriculum and the values propagated therein. (JAM)

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MORAL DIMENSIONS OF CURRICULUM CHOICES

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[Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 1988]

Let me begin backwards: (How) can we (i.e., teachers, administrators, institutions of education) avoid moral choices in curriculum decisions? It would be a wonderful life if we didn't have to worry at every step about the moral overtones of our choices - if we could merely decide that students should learn certain sorts of things in certain ways without regard for whether we are overstepping the boundaries of morally correct relations among human beings. We would not have to do more than determine - on non-moral grounds - what to teach and how to teach it. No angst, no stress, merely engineering, as it were.

I want to contend that such a thing is possible, but that it is not desirable if we are really concerned with the education of the children or students in our care. This will require a tour through a particular view of curriculum choices (which I shall call a "divided line" theory), with considerable attention to specific cases in order to make the points clear. I will end up urging attention to the types of argument necessary to defend curriculum choices in a morally justifiable fashion.

How to avoid moral choices in curricular decisions

First, believe this: there is a list of things that people in our society are expected to know how to do or to know about.

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The contents of this list might be argued about, but the point of it is not; in order to get along in the modern world, children must know how to read, do arithmetic (to some specified level), and know some facts about the country, the world, and the contents of our shared culture. The task of the school is in part to make sure that children learn this list. (For one approach, see Hirsch 1987.)

Second, believe this: to get children to learn this list is to take individuals who are already defined as individuals, as people, as having character, and to add to them the appropriate bits or lumps of knowledge. The additions are not to be seen as essential changes in the character of individual students, for that "character" is a given, the base upon which knowledge is laid.

Third, believe this: the right to determine the character of the students who attend schools does not belong to the school itself. That is a value choice - perhaps a religious choice - and is left to the parents of the children, in the context perhaps of their religious sects or ethnic groups. The schools do not and cannot attempt to do such an important thing as decide the character of their students.

Fourth, believe this: if we must ask why a student should study a particular scientific theory, literary work, or geographical fact, the answer is to be given in terms (roughly) of its usefulness to that student in later life, particularly in the context of the modern American social, political, and economic scene. Why should Alberta learn arithmetic? So that

she can balance her checkbook, or keep the books in the business she will work in, or recognize when her calculator is broken. Why should Bobby learn about evolution? Because it is a theory accepted and understood as the standard or accepted way of explaining the place of various organisms (including human organisms) in the scheme of things. Why should Clarence read Macbeth? Because people are always referring to it directly and indirectly at cocktail parties and in other significant social contexts, and if he doesn't know what they are talking about, he will lose out on the meaning of what is said. Dora shall read Plato because of all those footnotes. And so it goes.

Does this sound familiar? I hope it does, because it strikes me as the position taken by most professional school people. And they take this position, probably, because we have defined the task of schools this way, legally and institutionally.

What is morally important about this situation is that particular curriculum choices are seen as having no moral dimension at all. There is a general moral choice, at the macro level, as it were: the graduates of our schools shall be people who have this list more or less at their control for use in later life.

But what does this macro choice amount to, taken as an abstract vision of the character of those who complete our school programs? Think of an example, a person who attends a performance of Macbeth, The Miser, or Aida, or any other major dramatic work in the list of great plays. Elmer attends, we

imagine, with great pleasure: it's a spectacular play - i.e., one filled with spectacle. He sees the spectacle, enjoys the people on stage as contributing to the spectacle. But he attends to the meaning of what is said only as it contributes to the spectacle, not as it says anything about him and his own life. "Good play," he says as he leaves, and files it away. What the play - or any part of it - means or might mean to him in his situation is lost. It just isn't relevant.

This character lives on the surface of his life, of his times, we might say. He floats along uncomprehendingly, unaware of what supports him, except to know that it does in some way support him. But he doesn't know that one swims in the water, as James McClellan reminded us (1976), not on top of it. His own character is no concern of ours, of course, as long as he manages to keep afloat. And perhaps Elmer's alma mater might be proud of him: at least he attended the play. We haven't made the moral choice of his character for him, but we have given him enough knowledge to get along.

Teaching such students in this way is possible, and probably fairly comfortable for teachers and schools. The major choice is made for us about what we are to do; ours only to make rather minor choices about what that list consists of, then take appropriate means to make sure that most or all of our students go through the list.

A divided line theory of curriculum choices

But there is another way of considering curriculum choices, a way that makes the character of the student a (central or deciding) feature of those choices. (What follows depends heavily upon Macmillan 1982.)

The most questionable of those beliefs outlined above is the second: that the character of students is a given in the determination of their curriculum and the knowledge they gain merely an addition to pre-formed character. A different view takes the student's character to be (at least in part) a result of what that student learns, what he or she comes to believe about one's place in the world. Unlike Alberta, who merely learns enough to balance her checkbook, Andrea comes to see how the world looks when viewed through the prism of mathematics - and it looks different. Dora's footnote-oriented comprehension of Plato is put against Delilah's deep-seated Platonism, or against David's considered rejection of Platonism in favor of a hard-nosed physicalism.

Now see what happens to the rest of the beliefs that constitute the non-moral view of curriculum choices: there is no mere list of things to be added to the student's filing case of memory; it is the very nature of the individual we are talking about. The usefulness of the learning in later life is not its most important feature; the most important feature is what it makes of individuals - of how they view themselves and the world. And the task of the schools cannot be written off as value-free (whatever that might mean). Every curriculum choice is loaded with a moral message: this is what our students are asked to

become - people who view the world in certain ways, or who can empathize with a variety of views of the world and their place in it.

Let me generalize about this. It is quite conceivable that a teacher (or the school) could limit itself to that uncharacteristic list. In fact, it is also conceivable that we are talking here about different dimensions of what any particular teacher might ask the students to learn. Imagine a list of "objectives" for teaching, say, astrological theory to a group of high school students in a (wonderful) course in history of science. The teacher might ask the following things of the students:

a. That they memorize appropriate things (the signs of the Zodiac, what they stand for, when they fit, etc.), quite apart from any understanding of their place in the theory and apart from their place in the world - rote memorization, at its best (or worst).

b. That they understand those things in the context of the theory - e.g., the logical and putatively empirical connections of the different signs, what follows from the fact that one is a Taurus, born on May 1, 1936, etc., etc.

c. That they understand the place of the theory in various theoretical, social, and religious contexts, including, perhaps, how astrological theory fits together with the development of astronomy as a branch of physics. It might be important for them

to know, for example, that in various modern cultures astrological "facts" are considered in political decision making.

All of these "goals" could be attempted within either of the views of morality in curriculum choices. The study of astrology can be justified by appeal to that list, and a teacher could defend the teaching of such views by showing its relevance to modern life, whether it be cocktail party chat or the eventual planning of foreign policy.

But there are at least two other dimensions of the choice that might be considered:

i. We might ask that the students empathize with astrological theories as one way of seeing the place of individuals in the scheme of things, parallel but not necessarily equivalent to a Christian or "scientific" theory. A student who can view the world in this way is remarkably different from one who merely "knows" the theory; the old German term, verstehen, captures this element. (Note that we might not want the students to accept the theory as true, but only to see what the world would look like if the theory were true.)

ii. We might (finally) ask that the students believe (in) the theory - take it to be true, worth staking their lives on. We would ask them to commit themselves to the truth of the theory, or we would in other ways get them to commit themselves to the theory.

Now imagine these five placed on a chart, with the first three (a-c) placed above a line, the last two (i-ii) below it. Every one of them is a legitimate "learning" goal, something that good teachers might expect of students. Furthermore, I am not convinced that there is any way of testing learning that gets below the line. But we can see that the moral choice about the place of the theory in an individual's life occurs only below the line, at least as anything other than a "macro" choice. Below that line, every choice relates to the character of the student who succeeds in getting what the teacher is after. The development of a particular version of character is part of the justification of the choice.

And note that most teachers probably want to get below that line: what good is it to teach math, or evolution, or Christian ethics, if the students don't come to see that these are viable ways of viewing the world? Imagine the science teacher's distress at the student who answers all the questions on the test, but finally says something like, "Wonderful! But this doesn't fit me." (Some students, of course, will be able to give the reasons that this doesn't "fit" and perhaps we should count them among our successes; but if the teacher is below that line, particularly at the level of commitment, this student is a failure.)

I have chosen a strange example to emphasize the point here; most of us would not want our students to accept astrology as a guiding light, as a viable theory for their own lives. But one might equally well choose modern geological theory (plate

techtonics, evolutionary evidence, etc.) to make the point. Or one could go further afield and consider literary works (Macmillan 1982) or different historical interpretations of the state of world affairs.

The moral defense of curriculum choices

There is still one further point to be made concerning that divided line. The teacher who believes that all choices are being made above the line is probably mistaken; we do not control our students' lives to the extent that we can determine satisfactorily that we are not having this kind of effect upon their character. Perhaps Frederika will come to empathize with astrological theory, perhaps George will find it compelling enough to take it as a true theory, one that determines his place in that scheme. No matter how hard we try to stay above the line in our curriculum choices and our methods of teaching and testing, some students are likely to go beyond the teacher, below the line. Here lies moral peril. For it means that every curriculum choice becomes a moral choice even if it is not intended to be so important.

The importance of this can be seen in particular choices and in the ways in which schools deal with controversial areas. To take a not-quite-fictional example, imagine that Miss Howard assigns Lysistrata to her 12th grade class in World Literature. This play has a secure place in the history of literature, and it is one that exemplifies a non-traditional view of women's place in the world. We can imagine some parents objecting to their

children's reading it - and the grounds for their objection would lie below that line. (Parents' objections to Lysistrata led to the removal of a text from the schools in Columbia County, Florida recently.) Ordinarily, a school will allow for students to be excused from reading anything to which their parents object. "Alternative" readings are allowed - readings that "have the same importance". But there are no alternatives that express that point of view, that put forth that view of life in just that way. A student who reads an "alternative" does not get "the same thing" out of the study of literature. Miss Howard's choice is not substitutable, for no other work will do the same thing, develop precisely the point of view manifested by Lysistrata.

But here also lies moral opportunity. If we recognize that all curriculum choices have moral overtones, we are in a position to understand the moral stakes of curriculum arguments - the arguments that are presupposed by all choices of subject matter.

Teachers and other officials of schooldom must be much more sophisticated than we tend to be now. If this view is anywhere near correct, it points out ethical or moral dimensions of educational decisions that go far beyond the normal professional ethics with which we tend to concern beginning teachers; sensitivity to this sort of thing is not inborn, but develops over time and with study.

What is involved here? That is my final question, and I can only sketch in some rough outlines.

First, I assume that we should treat every curriculum choice as if we were asking at least for verstehen on the part of the

students, and with the possibility that they might commit themselves to the meaning of the material to be studied. We must ask ourselves, "What if these students were to believe in this position (be it a scientific theory, weltanschauung, form of life, or whatever)?" What sort of characters would we be bringing into existence?

Second, we must be prepared to evaluate or somehow assess the different types of character we are creating. A relatively homogeneous society can provide the criteria of assessment for such things, but we don't live in that kind of society now. The difficulties of making such choices should be obvious; current discussions of character or virtue ethics (MacIntyre 1981, Pincoffs 1986, for example) only begin to get at the problems.

Third, there are genuine problems with epistemological issues - which now take on moral dress - that must be faced and comprehended to a depth that most teachers do not now reach. How can one assess the truth of a scientific theory? How can one determine the viability of a "way of life", if at all? Particularly if the way of life is not one that is accepted by the students' parental community?

Fourth, we have to consider the teachability of various things. I think here of Updike's teacher, Mark Prosser in the short story,"Tomorrow and Tomorrow and So Forth" (Updike 1964), who believes that life is a fraud and that he should teach his students that; but teaching it puts him in an existential bind, for if it is true that life is a fraud, so is he, and so is his

teaching - an existentialist's version of the liar's paradox (Macmillan 1982).

Fifth, what are the rights and duties of teachers and schools with regard to the students' parents? Do we have the right to make such choices for students? Can we select Lysistrata without considering the type of character who develops if she understands what it is all about? Should we avoid Macbeth because (as John Updike put it in a private correspondence to me) "If us kids had grasped it [Macbeth's soliloquy] it would have withered our brains"? Do parents really have the right to make such choices for their own children? The discussion of indoctrination is much broader than the school's right (and ability) to determine the students' character.

Sixth, to what extent can we assume that there is agreement about such matters? Or that students will not be positively harmed by our choices? We are, after all, in a highly tenuous moral position as teachers - playing God with their lives in ways that we may not recognize.

Seventh, "educational" choices take on new dimensions here, too. By this I mean such things as the ways in which particular learnings, beliefs, etc., continue to promote further learning by the students. Some of our choices will shut off the possibility of further learning, others will open up new realms of possibility.

If this view of curriculum choices has any viability, we must recognize that attention to the meaning of what we teach

goes far beyond its usefulness in cocktail parties or even in careers, vocations, or foreign policy.

Please note that I do not think I have solved any problems here. If anything, this just shows how very complicated otherwise simple-seeming decisions really are. If to make a choice of subject matter is so charged with moral significance, then we all need to be much more aware of where we stand. And those arguments must be taken more seriously than most school people are willing to admit.

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